

## Political season's blocking sublimation

No. 30/231, July 23, 2001

Ukrainian politicians' energy, left over the sessions of the Verkhovna Rada and other manifestations of political activity, finds its way out in formation of pre-election political blocks and announcement of more or less transparent intentions to join forces in the campaign struggle.

Statements about intended blocking sound from the right and the left ends of the political spectrum, and increasingly many political parties are trying to squeeze into what they call «centrism», or as close as possible to the political area that seems to be the most attractive this season.

The tendency and the circumstances remind observers of another pre-election summer, 1997, with similar partnerships being formed and the President refusing to sign a new election law.

Then, in the summer of 1997, the main political activist unfolded in the Ukrainian parliament, which was trying desperately, for the first time in Ukraine's history, to approve a new election law that would provide for a mixed, majoritarian-proportionate electoral system. The start of the 1997 political campaign was marked by the lack of new clear rules of the election game and, therefore, struggle between the parliamentary heavyweights of the time (Moroz-Lazarenko-Marchuk) and expectations whose political will - the president's or the parties' - would prove to be stronger. The events developed in the environment marked by dramatic deterioration of relations along the parliament/president axis. The situation was further complicated by the resignation of then Prime Minister of Ukraine Pavlo Lazarenko in early July 1997. By the way, the official dismissal of that «offspring» of the Dnipropetrovsk family from the power Olympus coincided with his rise as a party leader and the emergence of the Hromada party as a major political player. The Hromada, in its turn, brought some spice to the 1998 election campaign and managed to overcome the 4% pass barrier and form a faction in the new parliament.

Yet, it is clear that the 2002 parliamentary campaign that is supposed to be officially launched in a few months will be much more dynamic than the previous one- even if the law introducing a different proportion of majoritarian and proportionate seats will be approved. While another factor that makes the 2001 developments similar to those of 1997 is the presence of a number of familiar political faces that determined the outcome of the previous race, a number of new political personalities have developed and gained prominence since then. Many of those new political figures have their own political interests and ambitions - sometimes more obvious and unequivocal than the ones present in the 1998 campaign. Dynamics of elites in action, so to say...

The previous campaign only introduced «new technologies» of political pressure and «black PR», based primarily on intuition of self-styled image-makers. In the forthcoming campaign these methods are likely to be more massive and aggressive, and, probably, more professional, as many of them were practiced during the 1999 presidential campaign.

The impact of negative factors is likely to grow as the time passes by and a new election law remains unsigned. If the president refuses to sign the new law again, the old (1997) election law will be used, with multiple drawbacks that hindered chances for making elections fair and transparent.

During the previous campaign the occasional cases of using compromising materials and blackmail looked like an initial test of the would be «war of compromat» and rogue techniques, the most publicized cases being Lazarenko's dacha and reported embezzlement of funds during the reconstruction of the Ukraina Palace. In the 2002 campaign the compromat battles are likely to resemble a real war. The techniques will change, as the practice has shown that voters are not impressed with information about large flats and houses owned by MPs and government officials – remember the effort to cast shade on Yushchenko by stories about his country cottage, practically ignored by journalists and the public.

Present-day compromat wars are likely to be focused on economic affairs and to use more professional vocabulary in their investigations and statements. An initial test has been started with the bankruptcy of the Ukraina bank and accusations of some prominent actors of the Ukrainian political stage of massive violations. However, users of the compromat battle techniques should be aware of the importance not to overdo, as Ukrainian voters seem to have some irrational sentiments about politicians whom they regard as «offended» by their rivals. A classical example in this sense is Mikhail Brodsky, now leader of the Yabluko party and parliamentary faction, who was elected to the parliament in 1998 straight from the pre-trial detention facility where he had been kept under arrest on charges of fraud related to his bank, «Dendi».

The struggle for chances to use and control the so-called «administrative resource» and, hence, to determine the outcome of elections long before the polling day, is also to become tenser than before, as the centers of political and administrative influence proliferate. In the 1997-1998 campaign a typical example of using the administrative resource for gaining the necessary votes was the people's Democratic Party (PDP) whose election list opened with the name of then Prime Minister of Ukraine Valery Pustovoitenko. The PDP received 12.35% of the votes in one of its strongholds, Vinnytsya, then led by Governor Anatoly Matvienko, then chairman of the PDP and now leader of the oppositional Sobor. The Kharkiv region, governed by another PDP activist, Oleg Diomin, MP, brought the party 5.96% of the whole number of votes cast in the region. Noteworthy, the party's success in other regions where PDP members did not occupy major administrative positions were far more modest: 3.5% in Odessa, 3.85% in Poltava, 3.23% in Luhansk, 3.03% in Dnipropetrovsk. In 1998, summing up the election results, Anatoly Matvienko said: «nowadays, 60% of the power in the regions is uncontrolled; therefore, it is necessary to continue the started process of «partying bureaucracy» (Ukraina Moloda, April 3, 1998). His comment did not go unheard. Commenting on the election outcome and political party scores in early April, President Leonid Kuchma stated: «those [of regional officials] who do not pull the carriage – we should thank them and look for new people» (Ukraina Moloda, April 11, 1998). Later on a number of similar statements were made, and the power-holders and the bureaucracy class appeared to have drawn the necessary conclusions, opening way to even broader use of the administrative resource.

Yet, regardless of successful use of undeclared opportunities of the power establishment to influence voters in favor of supporters of the regime, the role of the administrative resource should not be overestimated. A classical example of the previous campaign is the Agrarian Party of Ukraine that failed to overcome the 4% barrier regardless of the large number of high-ranking bureaucrats in its election list. The forthcoming elections may bring a number of surprises and disillusionment to political forces that are excessively reliant on the administrative resource. To a certain extent, the failure of campaigns built predominantly on the use of the administrative resource may be caused by its inefficiency. Caused by the inefficiency of the current state power as such.

The media and elections topic requires a separate, long and not necessarily fruitful discussion. The re-division of the Ukrainian media market at the national and – particularly – subnational level (for elections are won in the regions and local constituencies) and attempts to influence individual media outlets will continue, but a number of new techniques of manipulating the media and using the media for manipulating the voters will be needed. The current parade of blocking announcements may also be regarded as a political technique. Apart from real positioning, the announcements create information opportunities for parties to advertise themselves.

This summer is rich in concentrated announcements about political «engagements», but it is still hard to predict which of them will result in political «marriage of convenience». For instance, on July 18 leader of the Socialist Party Oleksandr Moroz announced that his party planned to form an election block with four political parties: the National Workers' Party, the Party of Protection of Interests of Peasants of Ukraine, the Social-Democratic Party of Ukraine (Buzduhan) and, probably, the Green Party of Ukraine – XXI. According to Moroz, «all of them have proved their opposition to the current regime» and the block expects to receive at least 52-55 seats in the new parliament. So far «this is a working figure, but a guaranteed one, the party cannot get less,» Moroz announced. He also repeated that the opposition blocks would not compete with each other during the election campaign.

On July 19, 2001, Ivan Chyzh, Oleksandr Moroz's former ally in the Social Democratic Party, nowadays leader of the SPU's opposite, the National Association Solidarity, announced that his political creation would take part in the 2002 election as a member of a block in which there would be

no «so-called» leaders but «subjects, equal but significant enough». According to Chyzh, the result should be «even more significant». Yet, Chyzh also said nothing about personalities and forces that would join his block, arguing that announcing the names would be «incorrect» while the consultations were still in process. The election tactics of the block is likely to differ from those of well-known political forces, according to Chyzh, as the most «promoted and well-known» personalities would represent the block in the majoritarian constituencies, provided the 50:50 election system remains.

Other forces that announced their declarations of intent on the same day were the Yabluko and the Krasnyy Ukraina. The parties' leaders Victor Chaika and Hennady Balashov signed an agreement about taking part jointly in the 2002 parliamentary elections. The party leaders agreed to develop a joint position on key issues to be followed by their parties in the political, economic and social spheres, to make joint statements on behalf of their block, to join forces for effective and successful cooperation in the forthcoming election race.

Current leaders of political rankings and holders of political brand names also make their statements and declare their intentions. At the beginning of July, after long silence and the lack of political positioning, the ousted Prime Minister of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko announced his decision to become a leader of a democratic election block. The announcement was made in Yushchenko's televised greeting from the global economic forum in Salzburg to the 5th congress of the Party of Reforms and Order. According to Yushchenko, «time has come when we must unite all reform-minded forces and head for the elections for victory». The Ukrainian right-wingers had been waiting for such an appeal for a long time. However, for months the information about exact participants of Yushchenko's «democratic forces» remained undisclosed. The hints about earlier negotiations between Yushchenko and Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament and one of the leaders of the PDP Ivan Pliushch added to the dilemma. Ivan Pliushch has been rather consistent and active in trying to involve Yushchenko to a block in which key roles would be played by the PDP, the Trudova Ukraina, the Party of the Regions and the Agrarian Party. Right-wing backers and followers of Yushchenko repeatedly claimed that Yushchenko could not and should not take part in the race in a block with those who had betrayed him (i.e., voted him down in the parliament on April 26 during the no-confidence vote). The simple logic that Yushchenko and his name could be used for other parties' purposes, apparently, convinced him. Ivan Pliushch was quoted at the end of the parliamentary season as saying «... it's increasingly difficult for me to comment Victor Andriyovych [Yushchenko]. It looks like either he is saying something very smart which is hard to understand, or he has not made up his mind yet» (Holos Ukrainy, June 17, 2001). So far Ivan Pliushch's idea to involve Yushchenko in «his» block has not been put into practice.

On July 15, having ascended Ukraine's highest mountain Hoverla, Victor Yushchenko announced the establishment of a «broad block of democratic forces called «Our Ukraine». Yet, having stated that, Yushchenko, in fact, said nothing specific. The Statement on the launch of «Our Ukraine» read: «as a result of intensive consultations and negotiations with a broad circle of co-thinkers, partners and allies, we have agreed on principles and ways of forming a new political force, built on the idea of consolidation. Today we begin the formation of «Our Ukraine» election block.» Nothing was said about what political forces were included in Yushchenko's «we» and no names were given, but in his interview on the top of the Hoverla mountain Yushchenko said: «... we have an agreement that the block will be formed both of center-left and center-right forces» (Ukraina Moloda, July 17, 2001). Traditional and consistent supporters of Yushchenko from the right – the two Rukhs, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Party of Reforms and Order – have not received any official public invitations to join the block. Similarly, it is unclear how exactly the block and individual political parties will ensure their «no-competition» claim regarding the National Salvation Forum, a block launched by Yulia Tymoshenko. Unlike the NSF, «Our Ukraine» will not take vehement opposition to Leonid Kuchma. Hence, it will be hard to combine their approaches that emerge not only along the ideological and program lines, but also at the level of political positioning. For instance, it is hard to imagine how any block can include both the Rukh led by Udovenko (which is the most probable candidate for «Our Ukraine») and Yulia Tymoshenko's NSF, as the Rukh (Udovenko) is consistently critical of practically anything Yulia Tymoshenko has done within the NSF.

Many observers argue that Yushchenko will inevitably lose votes in Eastern and Southern Ukraine if his block includes only Ukrainian right-wingers, which would be damaging for his claim of national leadership. Moreover, the chances that all right-wingers will join their forces under Yushchenko's leadership are not too strong, given the right-wingers long-standing rivalries and ambitions of the

parties' leaders and regional activists.

Hence, the formation of «Our Ukraine» is a difficult and vague process, but although it may be hindered by a number of underwater currents, it's definitely not a hopeless one. The new block's problems are not limited to the fact that the nomenclature and the official power-brokers will do their best to prevent the block from coming into prominence. «Our Ukraine» leader Victor Yushchenko has been consistent in demonstrating loyalty to Leonid Kuchma. Commenting on prospects for consolidation of «Our Ukraine», Taras Chornovil, MP, argues that «... obviously, it cannot include overt left-wingers, as they have absolutely different electorate, but it should include all pro-statehood forces regardless of their positioning in the political spectrum». According to Chornovil, the block may include some centrist parties, but definitely not the «oligarchic» ones. What exactly are the forces that are expected to form the «elite of Eastern Ukraine» and join the new block remains a matter of guess, but skillful use of compromise and negotiations, as well as of a number of other constituents of political success may make the block the front-runner of the forthcoming race.

On July 17, 2001, the favorites of the forthcoming campaign – leaders of the People's Democratic Party (Valery Pustovoitenko), the Party of the Regions (Mykola Azarov), the Trudova Ukraina (Serhiy Tihipko) and the Agrarian Party (Mykhailo Hladiy) signed a Declaration of Intent to form a long-announced election block. Commenting on the event, Mykhailo Hladiy stated that the parties' utmost goal was to win the 2002 parliamentary elections and form the basis of a coalition block in the Verkhovna Rada.

Valery Pustovoitenko added that a draft of a new election block would be formed by the end of the month. According to his new ally Mykola Azarov, leader of the Party of the Regions, the election block intended «to do organizational work before the official start of the election campaign». In his opinion, the agreement they signed was the first step towards formation of a single powerful democratic force. Hence, the first step is to be followed with next steps, and much will depend on what they will be like, as they will determine whether the parties and blocks will succeed in receiving dividends, i.e., seats in the parliament.

Noteworthy is President Kuchma's view on the blocking efforts of political parties. While he is «positive about the establishment of election blocks», he treats them with some reservations, as, in his opinion, those are not full-fledged blocks but rather «claims on their creation» (UNIAN, July 18, 2001). He also argues that in no other country political forces start a campaign so early. Speaking about current configuration of would-be election blocks, the President argues: «it's a different case, and the point is to include general practical economic interests in the election programs». «If one reads those programs, one will not tell them apart without a bottle [of something to drink],» Leonid Kuchma was quoted as saying to the provincial Ukrainian public a few days ago (Interfax-Ukraine, July 18, 2001).